Latin American History at the Movies (HIST 365.01)

“How has the popular cinema industry portrayed Latin American History? What can we learn from these depictions? In this class we will watch and analyze feature films from the United States and Latin America which grapple with various events and issues in Latin America. Through these films, we will both critically analyze historical developments in Latin America as well as the assumptions and ideological perspectives which go into the making of a film on Latin America. Through this process, we will develop a deeper appreciation for the complexities which embody Latin American and the problems which the region faces.

Requirements

Our goal in this class is to challenge existing assumptions, engage alternative viewpoints, and encourage critical thinking. Through the study of history, we seek to empower ourselves to be better citizens, and to provide ourselves with the skills necessary to play a positive and educated role in society. We need to be active constituents rather than mere recipients of our education. To accomplish those tasks, we should strive to create an open and supportive learning environment. Regular attendance and active participation are also necessary. Please drop me a note if you are unable to attend, or if you have any concerns or suggestions for improving the class.

Readings

There are three texts for the class. The primary text is the films we will watch on Latin American history. Two additional books will help us critically dissect these films:


For each class period we will read a chapter in the Chasteen book that talks very broadly about the themes that the film discusses, as well as an essay (from Stevens’ edited collection or elsewhere) that specifically critiques the film under consideration. Read the assignments before class so that you are prepared to carry on intelligent discussions of the films in class.
Assignments and grades

Course grades will be based on the following assignments:

- **Film introductions and discussions** (25 percent of course grade). Student groups will introduce each of the films and lead the discussion of that film. This will involve previewing the film (and perhaps other films by the same director or on the same topic), researching the historical context of the film, and engaging students actively in a discussion of the film. It is the group’s responsibility to help the class understand what is happening in the film, and your grade will be based on how well you realize that objective. Consider questions such as these in preparing for your presentation:
  - Who is the director? What else has this person made and how does this film fit into that genre?
  - What evidence is there of historical research that the film maker conducted in the process of producing the film?
  - What is the potential and limitations of the medium of film for interpreting history as portrayed through this specific film?
  - What are the cinemagraphic virtues of the film?
  - How have other reviewers critiqued this film?

To assist in the class discussion of the film, bring to class:

- A handout for the class that may include items such as a list of discussion questions, a study guide, related web sites, and/or class exercises for discussing the film.
- An annotated bibliography of sources related to this film and its historical context (either included in the class handout or given directly to the instructor).
- Copies for the class of a short primary source document related to the historical themes portrayed in the film.
- Overheads, powerpoint, or other visual aids such as maps, photographs, drawings, etc., to assist in the introduction and discussion of the film.
- Anything else that will help in the interpretation and understanding of the film.

- **Discussion board postings** (3 percent each, for a total of 45 percent of course grade).
  After each class discussion, post to the discussion board on the class webpage a short essay with your assessment of the historical value of the film, including relating it to the day’s assigned readings. How successful was the film in communicating historical facts and interpretations? Was it more or less successful than the readings? Did the film have other goals, and did it successfully achieve these? How would you critique the comments of your classmates on this film? I will grade your posting based on your incorporation of assigned readings, synthesis of the material, ability to analyze its significance, an evaluation of its importance to the broader themes of this class, and the extent to which you engage other students in a virtual discussion. Post your essay to the discussion board by the Monday following the day we have watched the film.

- **Final project** (worth 30 percent of the course grade). Working in small groups, rewrite the script of one of the films we have viewed in order to make it historically more accurate. What were the shortcomings of the film’s interpretations and historical concepts, and how would you improve its ability to communicate this information? This
assignment must be conducted as a scholarly work that includes significant library research into the historical context of the film. The form and prose of the project, however, should be creative and can take a variety of forms (a script, a story board, re-filming parts of the film, etc.). Include an annotated bibliography explaining the sources you used in the project. The last day of class we will present and critique these projects. Alternatively, consider working as a class to make a film on a historical event in Latin America.

Class Schedule

Jan 15 Introduction

**Read:** Donald F. Stevens, “Never Read History Again? The Possibilities and Perils of Cinema as Historical Depiction”
Chasteen, Introduction

*Gringo in Mañanaland* (Video PN1995.9.L37 G75 1995)


Jan 22 Ancient Civilizations

**Read:** David Freidel, “Betraying the Maya,” *Archaeology* 60, no. 2 (March/April 2007): 36-41 (on website).

**Film:** *Apocalypto* (DVD PN1995.9.F671646 A66335 2007)

Jan 29 Columbus

**Read:** Sonya Lipsett-Rivera and Sergio Rivera Ayala, “Columbus Takes On the Forces of Darkness, or Film and Historical Myth in *1492: The Conquest of Paradise*”
Chasteen, ch. 1

**Film:** *1492: The Conquest of Paradise* (Video PN1995.9 H5 F68 1993; DVD E111 .F68 2002)

Feb 5 Conquest

**Read:** Thomas H. Holloway, “Whose Conquest Is This, Anyway? *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*”

Feb 12 Women

Read: Susan E. Ramirez, “I, the Worst of All: The Literary Life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz”
Chasteen, ch. 2


Feb 19 Slavery


Film: *Xiça* (Video PN1995.9 F67169 X5 1993)

Feb 26 Indigenous peoples

Read: James Schofield Saeger, *The Mission and Historical Missions: Film and the Writing of History*
Chasteen, ch. 3


March 4 Patriarchy

Read: Donald F. Stevens, “Passion and Patriarchy in Nineteenth-Century Argentina: Maria Luisa Bemberg's *Camila*”
Chasteen, ch. 4


March 18 Slave resistance

Read: John Mraz, “Recasting Cuban Slavery: The Other Francisco and The Last Supper”


March 25 Progress

Chasteen, ch. 5

Film: *Los Olvidados* (Video PN1995.9 F6718 O49 1993)

April 1 Neocolonialism


Chasteen, ch. 6

**Film:** *And Starring Pancho Villa as Himself* (DVD F1234.V63 A63 2004)

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April 8 Nationalism


Chasteen, ch. 7

**Film:** *Frida* (DVD ND259.K33 F73 2004)

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April 15 Revolution


Chasteen, ch. 8

**Film:** *The Motorcycle Diaries* (DVD F2224 .G783 2005)

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April 22 Reaction


Chasteen, ch. 9

**Film:** *Romero* (Video BX4705.R669 R64 1990; DVD BX4705.R669 R64 2000)

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April 29 Neoliberalism


Chasteen, ch. 10

**Film:** *City of God* (DVD PN1995.9.F67169 C53 2003), or alternatively the sequel *City of Men* to be released on January 18.

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May 9 Final Presentations
Bibliography

This is a basic bibliography of sources on Latin American Cinema which are available in the library. Many more items are also available in Siegmund’s bibliography (http://www.libs.uga.edu/lais/laisno7.html). Sometimes the Internet Movie Database (http://www.imdb.com/) includes useful information. The Encyclopedia of Latin American History and Culture (Ref F1406 .E53 1996) and the Encyclopedia of Contemporary Latin American and Caribbean Cultures (Ref F1406 .E515 2000) include good background information on the topics discussed in the films we will watch in class. Use Latin American-specific databases such as the following to search for more information on your film and the historical events depicted in it.

- HAPI Online, Hispanic American Periodicals Index (http://hapi.gseis.ucla.edu/)
- HLAS Online, Handbook of Latin American Studies (http://lcweb2.loc.gov/hlas/)
- UT-LANIC, University of Texas -- Latin American Network Information Center (http://lanic.utexas.edu/)


Filmography

This is a select list of feature length films on Latin America. Films included in the syllabus are starred (*), and films critiqued in Stevens’ edited book have a hatch mark (#). Films in the Truman media library include call numbers.

* # 1492: Conquest of Paradise (1992). The film chronicles the first two landmark voyages of Columbus and takes us to the brink of his third and last. (Video PN1995.9 H5 F68 1993; DVD E111 .F68 2002)


Amores perros (2001). Three different people (young punk, supermodel, ex-radical turned hit man) and their dogs are catapulted into dramatic and unforeseen circumstances in the wake of a terrible car crash. (DVD PN1995.9.F6718 A55 2001)


At Play in the Fields of the Lord (1992). Missionaries try to contact and convert a group of Indians in the Brazilian rainforest.


Blood of the Condor = Yawar Mallku (1969). A dramatization of an actual incident which involved charges of sterilization of Quechuan Indian women without their consent as part of a birth control program administered by the United States Peace Corps.


Central Station = Central do Brasil (1998). An emotive journey of a former school teacher, who writes letters for illiterate people at Rio de Janeiro's central station, Central do Brasil; and a young boy, whose mother has just died in a car accident, to Brazil's remote Northeast, in search for the father he never knew. (PN1995.9.F67169 C45 1999)

Christopher Columbus: The Discovery (1992). Depicts Columbus’ first trans-Atlantic voyage as an epic and heroic adventure.


Como Era Gostoso o Meu Frances = How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman (1971). In the coastal wilds of 16th-century Brazil, a French soldier is captured by a tribe of people-eating Indians. (Video F2230.2.T84 C6 1995)

Courage = Coraje (1998). A true story based on the last months in the life of Maria Elena Moyano, a leader of a women's organization in a slum outside of Lima who was killed by the Shining Path for her resistance. (Video HQ1236.P47 C68 1998)


Death and the Maiden (1995). Fictional story of a former prisoner who meets her torturer after the fall of the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile.


The Emerald Forest (1985). Bill Markham, an engineer, returns to the Amazon year after year searching for his son who had disappeared into the jungle. After ten years of searching, Markham finds the man that had once been his boy, but now is a warrior from a different world.


Fidel (2001). Showtime biography of Fidel Castro’s rise to power in Cuba.


* Frida (2002). The life of artist Frida Kahlo, from her humble upbringing to her worldwide fame and controversy that surrounded both her and her husband, Diego Rivera. (DVD ND259.K33 F73 2004)

# Gabriela (1983). Set in Brazil, story of a middle-aged bar owner whose passionate romance with young Gabriela sends sparks flying in a town where sex and politics are the main diversions.


The House of the Spirits (1993). Based on Isabel Allende's novel, examines political, social, and economic changes in Chile. (Video PQ8098.1 L54 C323 1993; DVD PQ8098.1.L54 C323 2001)

* # I, the Worst of All = Yo, la peor de todas (1990). This historical drama tells the story of Juana Ines de la Cruz, one of the greatest poets of the Spanish Siglo de Oro who enters a convent in order to pursue her passion for writing. (Video PQ7926.1.J6 Z982 1990; DVD PN1995.9.F6718 Y63 2003)


In the Time of the Butterflies (2001). Inspired by the story of three Mirabal sisters who, in 1960, were murdered for their part in an underground plot to overthrow General Trujillo’s dictatorship in the Dominican Republic.


* # The Last Supper = La Ultima Cena (1977). A Cuban slaveowner decides to instruct his slaves in the tenets of Christianity by inviting twelve of them to a reenactment of the Last Supper. (Video PN1995.9.F6718 L3 1988)

Latino (1985). A Chicano Green Beret begins to question the morality of the secret war he is fighting in the jungles of Nicaragua.

# Lucia (1968). Follows the lives of three different women named Lucía during three different revolutionary periods of Cuba's history, the Cuban War of Independence in 1895, the Machado
era in the 1930's, and post-revolutionary Cuba of the 1960's. (Video PN1995.9.F6718 L83 1990Z)


*Memorias del Subdesarrollo = Inconsolable Memories. Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968). A study of Cuban society before and after the revolution as seen through the eyes of a man who is a landlord and self-styled writer. (Video PN1995.9 F6718 M44 1980Z)


#*Miss Mary* (1986). Set in 1930s Bueno Aires, this is the story of a cultured English governess whose display of compassion disrupts the tradition-bound existence of the wealthy household in which she works.


*The Mosquito Coast* (1986). Angered by the decline of American society, a brilliant inventor leads his family into the remote Central American jungles to carve out a new society. (PS3570.H4 M6 1999)


#*The Official Story* (1985). In the mid-70's, Argentina's military dictatorship carried out a brutal campaign of torture and murder against thousands of its own citizens. This is the story of the sheltered wife of a wealthy businessman who comes to face the legacy of that terror. (Video PN1995.9 F6718 H57 1995; DVD PN1995.9.F6718 H57 1998)
* Los Olvidados (1950). Luis Bunuel's study of street gangs set in the outskirts of Mexico City; a good boy is contaminated by young thugs in the slums, and both he and his tormentor die violently. (Video PN1995.9 F6718 O49 1993)


La otra conquista/The other conquest (2002). The story of Mexico in the decade after the conquest by Spain in 1520.


Rodrigo D: No Futuro (1991). A shocking portrayal of the reckless existence of youths in Medellín, Colombia, one of the most dangerous cities in Latin America.


Thirteen Days (2001). About the Cuban Missile Crisis. (DVD E841 .T45 2001)


Y tu mamá también (2002). Two teens set off on a wild cross-country trip with seductive, 28-year-old Luisa.


*Xiça* (1976). A diamond rush in the 1700s transformed Brazil's interior into a place of wealth and excess. In this unrestrained atmosphere, the slave Xica used her iron will and her sexual talent to seduce her way into becoming the unofficial Empress of Brazil. (Video PN1995.9 F67169 X5 1993)